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ABSTRACT

As the 16-24 age group, the traditional source of entry level workers, shrinks, employers increasingly have to hire the less advantaged to staff their entry-level work force; they must, therefore, hire people with deficient skills. At the same time, a mix of technical changes and heightened competition is increasing the skill level needed for work in America. The worker is being asked to have a broad set of skills, some of which were previously required only of supervisors and management. Employers want four groupings of skills. Individual competence includes communication skills, comprehension, computation, and culture. Personal reliability skills cover personal management, ethics, and vocational maturity. Economic adaptability skills--problem solving, learning, employability, and career development--help to get and keep a job. Finally, group and organizational effectiveness skill, essential from the employer's perspective, include interpersonal skills, organizational skills, negotiation, creativity, and leadership. These basic skills need to be taught in the context of something in which the learner is interested, and the most compelling interest is a job. Training also needs to be developed that emphasizes "filling in the gaps" between what the employee already knows and what the job at hand requires. (YLB)

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ASTD UPDATE: BASIC SKILLS*

WHEN ASTD STARTED ITS STUDY OF BASIC SKILLS IN LATE 1986, OUR EMPHASIS WAS, LIKE MOST CONCERNED WITH THIS ISSUE, FOCUSED ON THE 3 R'S. THE MEDIA HAD DONE AN EXCELLENT JOB OF FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE LITERACY ISSUE AND A LOT OF GOOD WORK HAD BEEN DONE IN CATALOGUING THE EFFORTS OF COMMUNITY GROUPS, PIC'S, AND EMPLOYERS IN PROVIDING LITERACY TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.

EMPLOYERS INCREASINGLY ARE INDICATING THAT THEY FULLY EXPECT READING, WRITING AND MATH DEFICIENCIES TO SHOW UP MORE FREQUENTLY IN THEIR WORKFORCE. PRIMARILY THESE DEFICIENCIES ARE EXPECTED TO SHOW UP AT THE ENTRY LEVEL.

WHY? THE 16-24 AGE GROUP THAT IS THE TRADITIONAL SOURCE OF ENTRY LEVEL WORKERS IS SHRINKING. THAT MEANS THAT AN INCREASING NUMBER OF ENTRY LEVEL WORKERS WILL COME FROM GROUPS WHERE HUMAN RESOURCE INVESTMENTS HAVE BEEN HISTORICALLY DEFICIENT. EMPLOYERS WILL INCREASINGLY HAVE TO REACH INTO THE RANKS OF THE LESS ADVANTAGED TO GET THEIR ENTRY-LEVEL WORKFORCE, HIRING PEOPLE WITH DEFICIENT SKILLS.

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*ASTD is studying basic skills as part of the joint ASTD-DoL project "Best Practices: What Works in Training and Development".

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT WHEN EMPLOYERS TALK ABOUT BASIC SKILLS, THEY MEAN A RANGE OF SKILLS BEYOND THE 3 R'S. EMPLOYERS RECOGNIZE THAT THE LITERACY PROBLEM, WHILE AN IMPORTANT ONE, IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG.

OUR RESEARCH INDICATES THAT THE RANGE OF SKILLS WORKERS NEED IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE IS EXPANDING. THIS UPSKILLING OF WORK IN AMERICA IS DRIVEN BY A MIX OF TECHNICAL CHANGES AND HEIGHTENED COMPETITION.

TECHNOLOGY IS DRIVING WORKERS TOWARD INCREASING AUTONOMY. THEY ARE LESS SUPERVISED, BUT MORE FREQUENTLY CALLED UPON TO IDENTIFY PROBLEMS AND MAKE CRUCIAL DECISIONS. AND WHILE NEW TECHNOLOGIES MEAN THAT THE DEPTH OF SKILL NEEDED FOR ANY PARTICULAR JOB MAY BE DECLINING, THE RANGE OF SKILL IS INCREASING.

MOREOVER, COMPETITIVE CHALLENGES ARE DRIVING COMPANIES TOWARD EMPLOYING AN ARRAY OF STRATEGIES THAT REQUIRE ADAPTIVE AND INNOVATIVE WORKERS WITH STRONG INTERPERSONAL SKILLS. BUSINESS STRATEGIES LIKE COLLABORATION (PRODUCTION THROUGH THE TEAM CONCEPT), PROVIDING EXEMPLARY CUSTOMER SERVICE, AND AN EMPHASIS ON QUALITY ALL DEMAND TEAMWORK, LISTENING SKILLS, THE ABILITY TO SET GOALS AND DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING GOALS, CREATIVITY, AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS.

COUPLE THIS WITH THE MOVEMENT TOWARD MORE PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYERS AGGRESSIVELY DRIVING DECISION-MAKING AND RESOURCES TOWARD WORKERS AT THE POINT OF PRODUCTION OR POINT OF SALE, AND YOU ARE ASKING FOR A NEW KIND OF AMERICAN WORKER.

IN FACT, THE AMERICAN WORKER IS BEING ASKED TO HAVE A WHOLE BROAD SET OF SKILLS, SOME OF WHICH WERE PREVIOUSLY REQUIRED ONLY OF SUPERVISORS AND MANAGEMENT.

EXAMPLE: THE BANK TELLER

COMPETITIVE SHIFTS AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES HAVE HAD A PROFOUND EFFECT ON THE STRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT OF BANKS. A NEW CUSTOMER SERVICE PHILOSOPHY DEMANDS THAT TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SPECIALTIES GIVE WAY TO A "ONE-STOP" SHOPPING APPROACH FOR FINANCIAL SERVICES.

THE BANK TELLER WAS TRADITIONALLY A PROCESSOR, WHOSE PRIMARY ROLE WAS TO PERFORM A SERIES OF REPETITIVE TASKS (CHECKS IN, MONEY OUT, RECONCILING) VERY WELL. COMPETITIVE PRESSURES TO SATISFY THE "ONE-STOP" DESIRES OF CUSTOMERS HAVE EXPANDED THAT ROLE TO INCLUDE ADVISING CUSTOMERS ON A WHOLE RANGE OF CUSTOMIZED FINANCIAL SERVICES. THE TELLER NOW IS PRIVY TO AN

ARRAY OF INFORMATION PREVIOUSLY IN THE DOMAIN OF MID-LEVEL MANAGERS, IS EMPOWERED TO ADVISE CUSTOMERS ON SUCH ITEMS, AND IS CHARGED WITH MAKING JUDGEMENT CALLS "ON THE LINE"--THAT IS AT THE POINT OF CUSTOMER CONTACT. MOREOVER, THE TELLER IS LINKED WITH DATA VIA A COMPUTER TERMINAL WHICH REQUIRES A NEW RANGE OF SKILLS TO OPERATE AND TO ACCESS RELEVANT DATA SPEEDILY.

IN SHORT, THE NEW BANK TELLER MAY NOT NEED TO HAVE THE SAME DEPTH OF SKILLS IN A NARROW AREA OF EXPERTISE, BUT INSTEAD MUST HAVE A GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF A WHOLE RANGE OF SKILLS TO BE EFFECTIVE IN THE NEW WORKPLACE.

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS EMPLOYERS WANT? [THE EMPHASIS IS ON COMPETENCE, NOT MASTERY.]

ASTD HAS CATEGORIZED THE SKILLS INTO FOUR GROUPINGS.

I. INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCE

COMMUNICATION SKILLS--LISTENING, ORAL COMMUNICATIONS, READING AND WRITING.

COMPREHENSION--THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND AND ANALYZE COMMUNICATIONS.

COMPUTATION--MATH SKILLS

CULTURE--THE ABILITY TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY IN A GIVEN CULTURE DUE TO AN AWARENESS OF THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT CULTURE OFFERS AND A SENSE OF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

II. PERSONAL RELIABILITY

THIS SET OF SKILLS CAN BEST BE CHARACTERIZED AS "HAVING YOUR STUFF TOGETHER". THEY ARE LARGELY KEYED TO SELF-ASSURANCE, RELIABILITY AND MATURITY:

PERSONAL MANAGMENT--WHEN TO BRUSH YOUR TEETH; SHOW UP FOR WORK ON TIME--HOW TO ORGANIZE ONESELF AND ACT RESPONSIBLY.

ETHICS--THE PROCESS OF LEARNING WHAT ONE'S VALUES ARE AND INTEGRATING THEM INTO ONE'S LIFE.

VOCATIONAL MATURITY--HAVING MOTIVATION, AS WELL AS THE ABILITY TO SCOPE OUT THE WORKING WORLD AROUND YOU; WHAT IT TAKES TO BE SUCCESSFUL, AND YOUR OPTIONS.

III. ECONOMIC ADAPTABILITY

THESE ARE BASICALLY THE SKILLS THAT HELP ONE TO KNOW HOW TO GET AND KEEP A JOB:

PROBLEM-SOLVING--THE ABILITY TO IDENTIFY A PROBLEM, ANALYZE IT AND DEVISE SOLUTIONS.

LEARNING--THE ABILITY TO PROCESS AND RETAIN INFORMATION, AS WELL AS A SENSE OF THE NEED FOR CONTINUING LEARNING TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE.

EMPLOYABILITY--HOW TO GET AND KEEP A JOB.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT--RECOGNIZING CAREER OPTIONS, THE NEEDED PREPARATION TO ACCESS THOSE OPTIONS, AND THE SET OF SKILLS PEOPLE NEED TO BE ABLE TO MAKE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS IN THE WORKPLACE.

IV. GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

ALL OF THE ABOVE SKILLS FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT--THE SET OF SKILLS PEOPLE NEED TO BE ABLE TO MAKE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS INTO AND WITHIN THE WORKPLACE. BUT GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS ARE ESSENTIALS FROM THE EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE.

AN EMPLOYEE WITH THESE CRITICAL SKILLS IS EXTREMELY VALUABLE:

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS--THOSE THAT ALLOW ONE TO INTERACT AND COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS IN THE WORKPLACE.

ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS--SOME SENSE THAT THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE ORGANIZATION ARE NOT THE SAME THING. RECOGNIZING ORGANIZATIONS HAVE A CULTURE AND PERSONALITY.

NEGOTIATION--KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT, BEING ABLE TO ARTICULATE IT AND TO MAKE A MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF THE GROUP.

CREATIVITY--THE ABILITY TO TAKE THE KNOWLEDGE YOU HAVE AND TURN IT INTO SOMETHING ELSE. INNOVATION.

LEADERSHIP--INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT AS AMERICAN BUSINESS MOVES TOWARD TEAM CONCEPTS AND PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT.

ASTD DOES NOT ENVISION ADVOCATING THAT THESE SKILLS BE TAUGHT AS DISCREET SKILLS, ALTHOUGH THAT IS CERTAINLY ALWAYS AN OPTION. PRACTICALLY SPEAKING, HOWEVER, IT MAY BE MORE EFFECTIVE TO BLEND THEM SINCE THE FEATURES OF SOME OVERLAP. IMPORTANTLY, THEY ALL COULD BE EMBEDDED IN OTHER TRAINING ACTIVITIES.

BUT BEFORE ANY DISCUSSION OF EMBEDDING, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND EACH SKILL AS A DISCREET SKILL. WHAT WE ARE ATTEMPTING TO DO AS PART OF OUR STUDY IS LOOK AT EACH AND ASK:

--WHAT IS IT?(DEFINITION)

--WHAT ARE ITS BASIC ELEMENTS?

--WHY SHOULD IT BE A BASIC SKILL?

--HOW SHOULD IT BE TAUGHT AS A BASIC SKILL?

FROM THERE WE WILL DEVELOP LEARNING PACKAGES THAT CAN BE PLUGGED INTO OUR MODEL FOR PROVIDING BASIC SKILLS IN A "FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT".

HOW SHOULD BASIC SKILLS BE TAUGHT?

IN OUR STUDY, WE ARE NOT ONLY CONCERNED WITH THE BASIC SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED, BUT ALSO WITH THE WAY IN WHICH BASIC SKILLS TRAINING IS PROVIDED.

THE WAY BASIC SKILLS TRAINING IS PROVIDED NEEDS TO BE CHANGED. WE NEED TO MOVE AWAY FROM CURRENT THINKING THAT SKILL ATTAINMENT TO A CERTAIN "GRADE LEVEL" WILL SOLVE JOB-RELATED BASIC SKILLS TRAINING PROBLEMS. THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE EMPHASIS ON BASIC SKILLS TRAINING PROVIDED IN A FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT. THAT IS, BASIC SKILLS NEED TO BE TAUGHT IN THE CONTEXT OF SOMETHING THAT THE LEARNER IS INTERESTED IN. AND THE MOST COMPELLING INTEREST IS A JOB.

IN ADDITION, ASTD WILL ASSERT THAT THERE IS A NEED TO MOVE MORE TOWARD TRAINING THAT EMPHASIZES "FILLING IN THE GAP" BETWEEN WHAT THE EMPLOYEE ALREADY KNOWS AND WHAT THE JOB AT HAND REQUIRES.

FOR EXAMPLE, IF REMEDIAL TRAINING IN READING IS REQUIRED, ANALYZE THE DEMANDS OF THE JOB, THE KNOWLEDGE THE WORKER HAS ALREADY, THE READING MATERIALS THE WORKER NEEDS TO EFFECTIVELY PERFORM ON THE JOB, AND DEVELOP TRAINING THAT FILLS IN THAT GAP. USE OR ADAPT MATERIALS THAT WILL BE USED ON THE JOB.

ASTD'S PANEL OF BASIC SKILLS EXPERTS IS ASSISTING IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR MODEL FOR ESTABLISHING AND DELIVERING BASIC SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS IN THE WORKPLACE. IT WILL INCLUDE A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FROM PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION, TO GAINING MANAGEMENT SUPPORT, THROUGH NEEDS ANALYSIS, TASK ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION. IT WILL SHOW THE USER HOW TO FILL IN THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT THE EMPLOYEE KNOWS AND WHAT THE JOB REQUIRES.

AND IT WILL EMPHASIZE FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT.

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